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INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING ON RELIGIOUS MINORITIES '
FIGHT TO REMAIN IN IRAQ

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P A R T I C I P A N T S

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Tony Perkins, Chair
Gayle Manchin, Vice Chair
Nadine Maenza, Vice Chair
Gary L. Bauer

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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR PERKINS: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I am Tony Perkins. I am the chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and I'd like to welcome you to this hearing today on "Religious Minorities' and their Fight to Remain in Iraq."

I would like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us today to offer their insight, their expertise, and their recommendations, and I would also like to thank Senator Joe Manchin and his office for securing this hearing room for us today and for their commitment to international religious freedom.

Most in this room know that the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent bipartisan U.S. government commission created in 1998 by the International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA.

The Commission monitors the universal right to freedom of religion abroad using international standards to do so and makes policy

recommendations to Congress, to the President, and to the Secretary of State.

Today as we're gathered here for this hearing, we do under the authority that is granted to USCIRF under IRFA, the International Religious Freedom Act, that gives us the authority to convene hearings.

Now over the past two decades, USCIRF has observed a strong correlation between religious freedom, social stability, security, development, and the consolidation of democracy. Conversely, the lack of religious freedom correlates with instability, increased security challenges, extremism, and a host of other social and political problems.

This correlation certainly pertains to Iraq where USCIRF has noted significant religious freedom challenges. Now this is particularly the case for communities who were targeted for genocide by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

And these same communities are still struggling to return to their homes and recover

from the trauma that they experienced. In fact, two of our commissioners, including one of our vice chairs, Nadine Maenza, who will offer remarks shortly, just visited Iraq last month to gain a better understanding of the present state of religious affairs.

Now we recognize that Iraq has many challenges, including efforts to reestablish stability and security following the territorial defeat of ISIS; to restore and to rehabilitate traumatized religious minority communities; to address long-standing Shi'a-Sunni issues; and to resolve tensions between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iraqi Federal Government.

However, recent years have been especially unkind to Iraq's religious minorities. Iraq, just for the historical context here, was one of the region's most religiously and ethnically diverse populations. For example, Jewish Iraqis made up an estimated one-third of the population of Baghdad only a century ago, until regional upheaval led all but a handful to flee to Israel and elsewhere. And

the sectarian violence of the mid-2000s displaced a massive swath of the country's historic Christian population and slashed it from roughly one-and-a-half million to an estimated 200,000 at present.

Now the rise of ISIS in 2014 compounded these challenges. The terrorist group perpetrated horrific atrocities against religious and ethnic minorities in northwest Iraq, focused on the areas of Sinjar and the Nineveh Plains. ISIS chased Christians from their towns, they executed Yazidi men, and abducted 6,000 Yazidi women and children into sexual slavery.

Now USCIRF objectively followed and reported on these horrific events and urged the U.S. government to not turn away or forget those who were suffering.

Today, we are focusing on the current status of those vulnerable communities. This hearing seeks to answer two questions: first, whether the conditions are improving significantly to allow them--these minorities--to return to their homes and ultimately not just survive but thrive in

Iraq?

And, secondly, what more can and should the United States along with our international partners do to support them more boldly and effectively?

I'll now turn to my colleague, Vice Chair Nadine Maenza, to discuss USCIRF's recent country visit to Iraq and highlight some of the religious freedom challenges and areas of tentative progress that were evident during their trip.

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you, Chair Perkins.

I want to join in welcoming you all to this hearing today about religious freedom in Iraq, an issue important to I know a lot of us in this room.

I was able to join fellow Commissioner Anurima Bhargava and USCIRF policy analyst Kurt Werthmuller on a trip to--delegation trip to Iraq last month. We assessed religious freedom conditions in the country and participated in an event commemorating the 2014 Yazidi genocide.

Two of our fellow commissioners had previously visited the country in March of 2018. We were able to meet with religious minority representatives, Iraqi and U.S. government officials, and NGOs who provided up-to-date picture of the situation. While we heard some positive developments on the ground in northwestern Iraq, we also heard of serious long-term concerns for many of the nation's religious and ethnic minorities.

In the Nineveh Plain, the traditional heartland of many of Iraq's largest religious minorities--or components, as we learned they prefer to be called--some communities have begun the long and fragile process of recovery.

Christian representatives and NGOs told USCIRF that an estimated 30 to 50 percent of displaced residents have returned to some traditionally Christian towns such as Bartella and Qaraqosh.

USAID and other international supporters have been making significant efforts to distribute aid, rebuild homes, and help the returnees find

some semblance of normalcy. We look forward to hearing more about these efforts directly from USAID in just a few moments.

While we were encouraged by the strong development work, far too few people have been able to sufficiently return home.

Only ten percent of the residents of Sinjar have been able to return, and two percent of Christians in the Tel Keppe district. Their concerns focused on two particular threats. First, the presence in the Nineveh Plains of the Popular Mobilization Forces, or the PMF, represents the clearest and most consistent obstacle. Iraqi government sponsored militia, such as the 30th and 50th Brigades who are aligned with Iran, continue to engage in violence and corruption, as well as exacerbate sectarian tensions in key towns in the area.

While the Iraqi government has made some attempts to rein in those militias, its ability and potential willingness to do so seems limited at best.

Religious minorities' second major concern is the potential for ISIS to regroup. The Iraq armed forces in conjunction with the U.S. military and other allies destroyed ISIS' last bastions of territorial control in late 2017.

Since that time, however, ISIS remnants, likely numbering in the thousands, fled into hiding but have continued to stage attacks with alarming regularity.

There is no doubt that they remain a real and present danger, especially to those they targeted from 2014 to 2017. I met a family personally who had fled Mosul after one of the children was killed and the mother nearly died. They attempted to return but were threatened with continued violence if they did.

We are looking forward to hearing from our witnesses to help us better understand these conditions.

Vice Chairman Gayle Manchin will now turn to the U.S. and international efforts to help those traumatized communities recover and rehabilitate.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you, Tony, Nadine, Gary--down there. Good to see you. And thank each and everyone of you very much for being here.

Iraq's religious minorities--Christians, Yazidis, Mandeans, Kaka'is, and others--are in particular need of international support to ensure they have a viable future in Iraq.

Many members of those communities are now questioning whether there is any genuine sign of hope returning to safety and security in their homeland. It is up to us to do all we can to help improve conditions on the ground in Iraq to make it possible for them to stay.

However, the tragic reality remains that many may choose to find permanent refuge elsewhere in the sadly growing diaspora of Iraq's religious and ethnic minorities.

In hopes of preventing long-term disappearance of minorities from Iraq's diverse religious and ethnic landscape, the United States has taken some key steps over the last two years.

The United States has devoted \$380 million toward the relief and rehabilitation of northern Iraq's vulnerable minorities who suffered the most under ISIS, largely for distribution through the tireless work of USAID and its partner organizations.

Congress passed House Resolution 390 in November 2018, also known as the Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act, which President Trump signed into law last December. This act declared that ISIS is responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, and other atrocity crimes against religious and ethnic minority groups in Iraq and Syria.

And this included Christians, Yazidis and Shi'a Muslims, among other religious and ethnic groups. It further directed U.S. policy to assist in meeting the "humanitarian, stabilization, and recovery needs" of those communities as well as to support the efforts of governments and nongovernmental agencies to hold ISIS members accountable for all of the above.

This afternoon, our primary objective is to follow-up on the challenges that religious minorities have faced and to assess efforts to support them as they seek to return home, rebuild their communities, and recover from the traumatic experiences of their recent years.

On behalf of USCIRF, I look forward to hearing the witnesses' testimony and recommendations, including the current state of return and reconstruction for those communities hardest hit by ISIS, the atrocities and what the United States and Congress can do to enable them to return and remain as integral parts of Iraqi society.

Thank you, and I now turn the chair back over to Tony Perkins.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Manchin. And I do want to recognize one of our fellow commissioners, Gary Bauer, who is joining us today for this hearing as well.

I would now like to turn to our first panel. The first panel will include Hal Ferguson.

Mr. Ferguson is USAID Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator of the Bureau for the Middle East with a portfolio that includes Iraq, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza.

Mr. Ferguson also oversees the Middle East Bureau's effort to help religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq and Syria recover from the ISIS genocide and to promote religious freedom throughout the region.

I do want to say that we are very appreciative of the work that USAID has done in that region in particular, and I know that you have worked closely with the Vice President in getting relief to many of the minority communities there.

So thank you for being here today, and we look forward to your testimony.

MR. FERGUSON: Thank you, sir.

Chairman Perkins, members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the U.S. government's efforts to help victims of genocide perpetrated by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

I would also like to thank the Commission for your continued efforts to highlight the plight of those persecuted for their beliefs, whether in Iraq, as we're discussing today, or in China or in Burma or elsewhere.

The indispensable reporting and advocacy of your Commission are making the efforts of USAID stronger and better informed.

Today I'd like to talk about what we have done to respond to the ISIS genocide in northern Iraq and the remaining challenges that face us. As USAID Administrator Mark Green has emphasized during his travels to the region, the Trump administration is committed to ensuring that help reaches those most in need, including members of Iraq's ethnic and religious minorities.

At the outset, I want to say that although we can be proud of what we've accomplished so far, the road to recovery for these devastated communities is long and difficult, and it will require continued commitment on the part of the United States, the government of Iraq, and our

partners.

Helping people recover from genocide is not like helping them recover from an earthquake. Nor is it like any other development problem. It's an effort that requires a tailored approach that addresses the fullness of needs in a deeply traumatized society--not just rebuilt schools and hospitals but also psycho-social support for survivors, reconciliation efforts between mistrustful neighbors, and the revitalization of a broken economy.

Two years ago, the United States channeled the vast majority of its stabilization funding in Iraq through a single implementer, the United Nations Development Program. UNDP was conducting important work--rehabilitating critical infrastructure in areas liberated from ISIS, but in a way that did not adequately engage communities targeted for genocide, nor address their specific needs.

In October 2017, Vice President Pence called upon the U.S. government to do more, and we

answered that call. In the two years since, we have scaled up our efforts dramatically in terms of dollars, partners and work performed.

Whereas in 2017, the United States had provided only about \$3 million for stabilization in Ninewa, today the U.S. has contributed \$380 million in total assistance.

Whereas in 2017, USAID had only a handful of U.N. partners in Ninewa, today we have 57 local, 13 faith-based, and 35 international organizations and counting, each contributing in ways appropriate to their size and specialization.

These partners include Catholic Relief Services, which last week received an award to work with the Chaldean Catholic Archdiocese of Erbil to provide support to long-term displaced residents from Ninewa. They include Samaritan's Purse, which through a number of USAID financed awards, is rehabilitating homes and providing clean drinking water and sanitation for families in Sinjar and elsewhere.

And they include local Iraqi groups,

funded directly via a new USAID system called the New Partnerships Initiative launched earlier this year.

This is not just an American effort. And we are proud to be sharing the burden with friends and allies at home and abroad. In the past year, USAID Administrator Mark Green signed Memoranda of Understanding with the Knights of Columbus and the governments of Hungary and Poland. These MOUs are not just empty words. Just last week we joined the Knights of Columbus and the government of Poland to announce an award which will provide health care for those displaced from their homes in Ninewa.

And I am proud to announce that we'll be working with the government of Hungary to expand our coordinated investments in the town of Qaraqosh. USAID will provide funding to a local group to restore a commercial center and shops there while Hungary has directed new funds for the rebuilding of homes and other infrastructure.

But as measured by the return of those displaced, we have seen only modest success from

our efforts. Although according to the International Organization for Migration, Ninewa has the highest number of returns in Iraq, members of persecuted religious minorities lag far behind. An estimated 927,000 people from Ninewa remain displaced.

We are struggling against tectonic forces in Iraq, in which the ISIS genocide is only the latest atrocity contributing to the declining size of the country's religious and ethnic minority populations.

Decades of government neglect and discriminatory policy in Iraq have marginalized these communities and more than 15 years of almost constant sectarian strife have driven hundreds of thousands from their homes. Lack of security remains the primary barrier to returns.

In Sinjar, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, the PKK, runs unchecked, conscripting young Yazidi boys into its forces. Elsewhere in Ninewa, the largest threat comes from Iranian-backed elements of the Popular Mobilization Forces, which continue

to occupy swaths of the Nineveh Plains long after Isis' defeat.

Militias such as the 30th and 50th Brigades have become part local mafia, part Iranian proxy. They terrorize those families brave enough to have returned, extort local businesses, and openly pledge allegiance to Iran.

The U.S. government recently sanctioned the leaders of the 30th and 50th Brigades under the Global Magnitsky Act for their role in serious human rights abuses.

But while the Iraqi government has pledged to rein in these militias, they continue to operate with impunity with the authorities seemingly unable or unwilling to confront them. Just this week, we learned that the 30th Brigade has assumed the role of registering NGOs implementing U.S. projects in Ninewa, an unacceptable level of interference.

Until the Iraqi government resolves these security concerns, we will continue to see limited returns in many parts of Ninewa.

Administrator Green believes passionately

in the commitment of the people of the United States to religious freedom, and he often talks about how supporting ethnic and religious pluralism is an inherent component of good development work. It is part of who we are as Americans, and we know it is part of what makes any society strong. This is why we remain committed to Iraq's historical diversity despite the many challenges we face.

With this Commission's guidance, and our own perseverance, and the courage and faith of Iraq's mosaic of communities--or components--we believe that we will succeed.

Thank you. I look forward to the exchange.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Mr. Ferguson, for your testimony.

We do have, I think our commissioners happen to have a few questions for you. I will begin.

You said there has been modest success in the returns. At this point in Iraq, after years of

the United States being there and massive investment of both resources and lives, how do we measure success?

MR. FERGUSON: So the objective of the United States government, of our administration, is for people to return home. And in that way, we'll be able to reverse the effects of the genocide committed by ISIS, and we've had some modest success. There are those towns where, as was described in the opening statements of the Commission, there have been returns. Telskuf where the Hungarians have been very successful in rebuilding infrastructure, homes and other efforts there, many people have turned home.

Qaraqosh is another place where because of comparatively good security people can return home, and yet, as we've all discussed, Sinjar, Batnaya, other places, are blocked because of security.

So our definition of success remains people feeling secure and satisfied to return home on their own terms, and that success is blocked currently, largely due to security concerns in the

Nineveh Plains and in Sinjar.

CHAIR PERKINS: And those security concerns go back to the state-sponsored militias in part?

MR. FERGUSON: In part, yes. Not exclusively. As I mentioned, the PKK, of course, is a significant force in Sinjar--a designated terrorist organization, which we need to take seriously as well. As was mentioned in the opening statements, ISIS remains a concern, and as I said, the ISIS genocide was only the latest atrocity, and I think people who remain displaced are indeed fearful that either ISIS will come back or some other group, but I do want to particularly emphasize the PMF.

They are formally part of the Iraqi security apparatus now and should be formally controlled by the Iraqi government, and yet in places like Batnaya, Bartela and elsewhere, they're able to act with impunity.

CHAIR PERKINS: Just to get, before I pass this off to my other commissioners, how many

Yazidis currently remain in these refugee camps that have not been able to return to their home? What kind of percentages are we talking about?

MR. FERGUSON: According to IOM, there are approximately 120, 150,000 Yazidis remaining in IDP camps. That contrasts with about 61,000 Yazidis who have returned home to Sinjar.

CHAIR PERKINS: So the majority remain in camps.

MR. FERGUSON: The majority remain in camps. And Sinjar remains highly insecure and with significant development problems still.

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you again.

It was, being in Iraq and seeing the work on the ground and listening to the NGOs meeting with USAID and hearing the work was actually really encouraging for us. So thank you for all the work you're doing in Iraq.

So I wanted to just ask a question about the Iraqi government sponsored militias. Who is paying them and how do they get their orders and how does that work?

MR. FERGUSON: Thank you for the question.

It is a complex response or answer to that question. So formally they're part of the Iraqi government security apparatus, and indeed salaries are paid and they flow from the Iraqi government. And so theoretically they answer to the Iraqi government. The Popular Mobilization Committee, the PMC, is responsible for all individual militias.

However, first of all, the United States is not satisfied with the command and control of these individual militias, and not just in Ninewa, I should note, but throughout the country, especially in Anbar where they are also parasitic on the local population in many instances.

So not only are we satisfied with the command and control by the Iraqi government, but as we all know, many PMF units also answer to Iran. The 30th and the 50th Brigade, we believe, are strongly affiliated with Iran. They openly announce their affiliation and their responsiveness to Iran. They put up posters of the Supreme Leader

at the entrances to towns, and so it is clear to us that many of these units--the 30th and the 50th, I would highlight--maintain, shall we say, pretty limited loyalty to the Iraqi state, even though they are formally part of that security apparatus.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: So as you have worked and sort of getting a better lay of the land and how--is there anything that you believe you need to do differently or how you're working with the Iraqi government or with security? Are you seeing things that you may be able to do differently?

MR. FERGUSON: Thank you, ma'am, for the question.

In terms of the security situation and working with the Iraqi government, I want to say that USAID and indeed the U.S. Embassy have strong working relationships with the Iraqi government, and we--serious security considerations, aside, which afflicts not only Ninewa, but of course Baghdad and our own embassy compound, we do see the Iraqi government as a partner in this effort.

And so I'm satisfied with that

partnership, and I would not propose necessarily that we change our approach from USAID's perspective nor from the embassy's.

As I've mentioned before, we expect more from the Iraqi government as far as security is concerned, and not just in Ninewa. They need to take their responsibilities not only for providing security to our personnel in the country seriously, but they need to take care of their own citizens in Ninewa and elsewhere.

Beyond that, in terms of what we could do better or differently going forward, I think this is an important question, which I'd like to explore a little further with your indulgence. We've changed a lot of how we do our work over the last year, year-and-a-half, and we intend to continue doing so.

The diversity of partnerships that we have today is an important part of what makes our work successful, and we continue to--we intend to continue zeroing in further on local partnerships. These are the people who live on the ground and

know what the needs are and can do that work best.

We plan on expanding those partnerships and do not intend to let up on our assistance in Ninewa.

Finally, and I'll add just one more thing, I want to talk about the importance of communication. Prior to 2017, indeed, in fact, earlier in 2018, we had very little branding of our work. Very few people knew what USAID was doing, what the United States government was doing to help in Iraq, and not just in Ninewa but throughout, and in summer of last year, we reversed that.

We overhauled our branding and marketing policy, and not only are all projects going forward marked with USAID brand and logo, but retroactively we went back and branded everything we had done. And so a school that had been rehabilitated in Hamdaniya a year previously now has the USAID brand on it.

And now we understand you can drive through parts of Nineveh Plains from Qaraqosh up to Bartela and see nothing but USAID logos everywhere

you go. We think this is an important aspect of our work. We're not doing this just to rebuild these towns. People need to know that we're helping them rebuild their towns.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: I was really struck by your comments about the militias and how the Iraq-Iran situation works out with Iran paying them and their--

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: Iraq paying.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Right. Iraq paying them and their loyalty to Iran. Rouhani coincidentally was in New York this week, telling everybody that would listen that the United States spreads terror everywhere it goes and that where Iran goes, there's an end of a terror, and there's peace.

It's laughable, but in many cases when Iran does expand in the region, they have proxy forces, and those proxy forces are often actually led by Iranian officers or others. Do we know

whether this is an internal allegiance by these militias to Iran or do we think there's actually Iranian leadership in Iraq telling, directing the persecution that's going on?

MR. FERGUSON: I can't speak to any direct specific command and control between Iran and these militias. I'm not confident in that information. But it is evident, and not just in Ninewa again, that many of these militias do respond to Iranian instigation or direction one way or the other.

The rockets that went into the embassy compound a couple of nights ago were not fired by the Iraqi army; right? They were probably not fired by the Iranians from Iran. They were fired by Iranian proxies in Iraq. That is what is reported openly, and that is what we all expect to be the truth.

And that gives you an idea of the reach of the Islamic Republic in Iraq right now. It's extremely troubling, and it is a large part of what has caused our government to take the security situation very seriously there and to draw down our

personnel so as to limit our exposure to that clear and present danger of those proxies.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Thank you.

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: When we were in Iraq, we understood the implications of the drawdown, what that meant. There were so few Americans now in the embassy working.

I was curious how many people USAID has in Iraq and how the drawdown has affected your work in terms of working with partner management and engaging with your partners?

MR. FERGUSON: Thank you, ma'am.

This is an important matter to discuss. We have about eight people on the ground currently give or take on a given week with travel in and out. And that is split between Baghdad and Erbil.

That is under the current ordered departure, right. So the ordered departure is what currently limits our staffing footprint on the ground. It is our expectation that the ordered departure can last through into November, but there's also an ongoing review of our longer-term

posture and footprint there, not just USAID but State Department and all agencies within that embassy.

I can't speak to the ultimate conclusion of that posture review. That is ongoing and State Department is in the lead. But it would not be surprising to me certainly if we wind up with a pretty low number of people on the ground. As you just heard me say, the security concerns there are real, and I do not expect them to go away.

What that means for USAID's work is that we need to be creative and diligent in attempting to further the mission that is asked of us and is important, both in the north of the country and throughout Iraq, while accepting a certain amount of risk, given our lack of presence there. We rely very heavily on third-party monitors who are able to travel throughout Iraq more easily than we can and who survey every site, every activity where we conduct work, and send reports back to make sure that it's being conducted as expected.

We've received no reports from any of our

implementers that they've in any serious way been inhibited by current low USAID people on the ground, and in fact the work continues unhindered, which we're very proud of, and is a testament to the dedication and courage of our partners. Both the locals, the internationals, faith-based, all of them, are very brave people doing important work.

And so the limitation of our footprint going forward is troubling, and I don't want to dismiss that. I don't want to lessen that. It's a problem. It's a big problem for our work, and it comes with risk in terms of oversight, in terms of guidance and strategy, in terms of adequate programming.

But that limited footprint exists for a reason, and that does not take away the mission that we must accomplish there.

CHAIR PERKINS: All right. Mr. Ferguson, I do have another question. I know with the Middle East being in your portfolio, this should be a piece of cake to you to appear before USCIRF today. We're friendly.

I do want to ask a question though. As I understand, elections have been called for this spring, I think, in April, but as I appreciate it, and please correct me if I'm wrong, that in order to vote in these elections, they'll have--everyone will have to return home.

And when you have, you know, populations that are still in refugee camps, you have populations that cannot return for security and safety reasons, how are you going to have a free fair election?

MR. FERGUSON: Thank you.

This is a considerable concern to us. There are a lot of people who are still displaced, and not just from Ninewa. That country is not healed. People are still moving about. And the requirement for people to vote at home is a severe problem and will cause distortions in results, especially for these elections, which are at the provincial level.

These are not national level elections. These are elections for the Ninewa provincial

council, elections for the Anbar provincial council. And so if you've got a large proportion of the population in Ninewa, which is dispersed and unable to vote adequately, this is a significant problem. We're aware of it.

We do have mechanisms in place that can address this to some extent, and we are in conversations with our partners to determine what we can do, either in advocating for amendments to the Iraqi approach to these elections or in facilitating to whatever extent we can within the bounds of Iraqi law the registration and participation of displaced persons.

That's something that we did for the parliamentary elections previously, and that's something that we can do going forward. But it is not an easy answer, and it is of great concern to us because these elections are important. They determine the governance of Ninewa, right, and of all provinces one by one, and you need to have your citizens able to vote in those elections.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you. Thank you, Mr.

Ferguson. We appreciate you coming today and testifying before our Commission.

We are going to trans--I'm sorry. Did you have another question?

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: No, I didn't. Thank you.

MR. FERGUSON: Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Okay. We're going to transition to a second panel that will include organizations and individuals involved there in Iraq.

Pari Ibrahim is the Founder and Executive Director of the Free Yezidi Foundation. She left Iraq with her family when she was three years old, fleeing attacks by the Saddam Hussein regime. She and her family were brought to the Netherlands as political refugees. She is passionate about the psychological treatment for sexual abuse survivors, gender equality, and women's empowerment in the Yazidi communities.

Also Reine Hanna will be on our second panel. She is the co-founder and Director of the

Assyrian Policy Institute, a non-profit which aims to support Assyrians as they struggle to maintain their rights and their ancestral homeland.

I believe we're actually going to have all four of our next, final panelists come. Aaron Ashoff is with Samaritan's Purse. He's their Deputy Director of International Projects. He previously served as the Regional Director for Europe and the Middle East before his recent promotion to the senior management team.

He was an active duty officer in the United States Army and a Bronze Star Medal recipient awarded in Operation Iraqi Freedom. He has worked for Samaritan's Purse since 2008 where he served in field assignments providing life-saving assistance to Somali refugees in the Somali state of Ethiopia, and also was involved in the Ebola Task Force response during the Ebola crisis in West Africa.

Scott Portman is Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa at the Heartland Alliance International and has more than 20 years

of experience in human rights programming. Throughout his tenure, Scott has designed and implemented innovative programs in both mental health and access to justice sectors with a focus on torture treatment, forced migration, human trafficking, gender-based violence, child protection and programs for religious and ethnic minorities.

Scott supports program development efforts and provides technical consultation on mental health and protection projects in the Middle East, and we appreciate all of you being here with us today.

I will begin with Reine, if you would begin, and then we will hear from--I believe we may see if we have questions from each, and then we will continue with each one of our speakers.

Thank you.

MS. HANNA: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and members of the Commission, for the opportunity to testify today.

Between the Department of State's

Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom and the United Nations Global Call to Protect Religious Freedom earlier this week, the attention being paid to the question of religious freedom is unprecedented.

Unfortunately, such attention is necessary given the great scale of persecution and genocide in the contemporary world.

Hearings on religious freedom provide an important forum to engage with the destruction of ethnic and religious groups--such as Mandeans, Yazidis and Assyrians--in Iraq. My message today is that the crisis of religious freedom must be addressed through a discussion of the fundamental political and security problems that have enabled the genocide of Assyrians and continue to threaten their survival today.

Without a serious understanding of these problems, it is impossible for the desperate state of religious freedom in Iraq to improve.

In March 2016, the Obama administration declared that ISIS had committed genocide against

various groups, including Assyrians, but the ISIS genocide was, in fact, merely the latest round of persecution that has left Assyrians on the verge of disappearance in Iraq.

Prior to 2003, the Assyrian population in Iraq was approximately 1.5 million. Today, the number has dropped to less than 200,000. Assyrians have endured profound discrimination and targeted violence, both for their Christian faith, as well as their distinct ethnic identity, rooted in the ancient history of Iraq.

The unequal degree of suffering experienced by Iraq's marginalized communities is a reflection of political and security policies that have completely failed them. Based on current realities and trends, the most likely outcome for Assyrians in Iraq is that they will disappear entirely.

The good news, however, is that it is not too late to act--and the policies necessary for Assyrians to survive are clear and actionable.

Since 2003, Assyrians have sought to form

a self-administered province in the Nineveh Plain--their ancestral homeland--in accordance with Article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution. This effort only became more crucial as Baghdad and other places were emptied of Assyrians targeted by violence.

The advancement of this policy, however, has consistently been undermined by the negligence of the Iraqi government as well as interference from the Kurdistan Regional Government, which included the Peshmerga's unilateral expansion into the Nineveh Plain. These factors have eroded the capacity of Assyrians to achieve and secure conditions of real equality in their homeland.

The Nineveh Plain's official designation as disputed territory comes at the expense of Assyrians, Yazidis, and other marginalized communities who have historically inhabited these areas.

The ongoing political conflict has created lasting uncertainty, prevented development, enabled violence, fueled departure, and continues to hinder

locals return to areas affected by ISIS.

In a landmark moment for Assyrians in Iraq, on January 21, 2014, the Iraqi Council of Ministers voted for the creation of a Nineveh Plain Governorate. This was the result of a more than a decade of advocacy by Assyrians and other communities in Iraq.

This new governorate would serve as a safe haven for the marginalized, including Assyrians, while remaining part of Iraq and under the authority of the Iraqi Central Government. The January 2014 decision renewed hopes for Assyrians in Iraq. However, this new hope was short-lived as ISIS invaded the Nineveh Plain just months later.

Weeks before ISIS advanced into the Nineveh Plain, KRG security forces forcibly disarmed local Assyrians, pledging to defend the population in case of an attack. But when ISIS approached, KRG Peshmerga forces tactically withdrew from their posts at the last minute, without firing a single shot and without notifying the local populations. These actions mirror those

that took place in Sinjar in August 2014.

Perhaps the most haunting aspect of the events of 2014 in both Sinjar and the Nineveh Plain was not the straightforward evil of ISIS, but the fact that these communities were systematically rendered vulnerable to the attack by the very government that was supposed to protect them.

In the wake of these actions, described by both Assyrians and Yazidis as a betrayal, Assyrians formed a security force called the Nineveh Plain Protection Units, the NPU, signaling not only their desire to remain in their lands, but to have a greater power over their future.

The NPU has proven itself to be a reliable partner for the U.S., first through its participation in efforts to liberate the Nineveh Plain from ISIS, and, second, by providing security in the southern towns since its liberation.

Its soldiers are highly motivated to defend their towns that their families have inhabited for centuries and have never expanded or deviated from that mission.

The NPU's reliability is expressed through its total lack of violations and transgressions. It has been equally effective in guarding Assyrians in day-to-day life as during cultural events and religious ceremonies.

The NPU is not a party-political entity. Those serving in it are not members nor supporters of any particular party. They are drawn from the several ancient churches in the Nineveh Plain and are deeply attached to the survival of their faith in their homeland, even in the face of appalling long-term negligence and the shock of ISIS.

Today, security in the Nineveh Plain remains divided between KRG Peshmerga forces, Iranian-backed militias known as Brigade 30 and Brigade 50, the Iraqi Army forces, and the NPU.

The instability in the region has resulted in the emergence of a new threat to locals as Iranian influence has expanded into northern Iraq through transgressive sectarian militias. The NPU can serve as a bulwark against this threat to both locals and American interests.

The communities of the Nineveh Plain are constantly referred to as the voiceless, but they have always had a voice. The problem is that no one is listening. The API has gathered extensive testimony from locals that reflect how necessary the NPU is for the survival of Assyrians in Iraq. It is a legitimate, trusted local force that seeks to preserve Christianity in Iraq and help stabilize the country after ISIS. But most importantly, Assyrians have voted in favor of the NPU with their feet.

The rate of Christian return in the towns guarded by the NPU is comparably higher than those controlled by other forces. In fact, it is greater than the number of Christian returnees in other Nineveh Plain towns combined.

In the town of Bakhdida, Qaraqosh, for example, approximately 35,000 Christian Assyrian inhabitants have returned--70 percent of the town's original population--whereas in Tesqopa, or Telskuf, which is controlled by the KRG Peshmerga, the rate is 20 to 25 percent, and under Brigade 50

in Tel Keppe, the rate is seven percent.

Despite the remarkable success of the NPU, the dangerous security and political status quo has been upheld, and local governance and security policies have not changed. While the current level of U.S. assistance to the Nineveh Plain is exceptional and essential, its impact is severely limited and undermined by the failure to resolve the security challenges in the region.

The abuse of religious freedom in Iraq is a symptom of failed governance. The Iraqi government and its international partners have a very short window to demonstrate that they have learned from the mistakes of the past and to commit to policies that advance real solutions. And yet this moment presents an opportunity to do just that.

In the NPU, the United States now has a security partner in the defense of religious freedom. The NPU has already played their part in defeating ISIS. All they need now is the support to ensure that they can protect their families from

future threats.

In addition to immediate security needs, support for a Nineveh Plain Governorate is the most direct and straightforward way to defend the religious freedom of Assyrian Christians in Iraq. Such a province would enable the various communities of the Nineveh Plain to develop sustainable, functional and democratic forms of local administration within the framework of the united federal Iraqi state, in order to preserve the continuity of groups like Assyrians within their homeland.

Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Ms. Hanna. Any questions from our commissioners? If you'll just remain, we may have questions at the end.

Ms. Ibrahim.

MS. IBRAHIM: Thank you very much.

On behalf of the Free Yezidi Foundation, I would like to thank the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for having the Yezidi voice in this important hearing.

Just over five years ago, ISIS terrorists began the genocidal campaign against the Yezidi community. This was a well-planned and carefully targeted attack against the Yezidi community aimed to eradicate the Yezidis not for territory or wealth but just simply to destroy our people because of our religion.

One young Yezidi man was brought to a mass grave, shot multiple times, and was incredibly lucky to survive. He hid under the dead bodies until the ISIS shooters left and later crawled to safety. He has now been united with his wife and two children. The other men, dozens of them, were killed in the mass graves.

One woman was among the hundreds held captive in a town called Tal Afar. This was after her brothers and mother and father had been executed. She led a daring escape, bringing a dozen Yezidi women and little children to safety. They walked for miles under the cover of darkness, finally climbing Mount Sinjar and reaching safety. These that I'm talking about are the fortunate

ones.

The other women and girls were literally sold on slave markets, and this is not a metaphor. Until the fall of the ISIS caliphate, Yezidis were literally brought to physical slave markets, where ISIS members would buy and sell human beings at negotiated prices. Slave markets, in the 21st century. There were judges to approve the sale of human beings, documents to catalogue ownership and price, and paperwork to ensure the business of selling our women and girls.

I am saying this to convey the systematic and organized nature of the sexual violence that was perpetrated--a fundamental part of the ISIS genocide against Yezidis. There has not been a single indictment, anywhere in the world, for those actions.

The Yezidi community is grateful to the United States for its forceful voice and its commitment of resources in support of the Yezidis and other religious minorities in Iraq.

I believe the Yezidis are well aware of

the programs and the efforts from the U.S. government to pay close attention to the future, if any, for religious minorities in Iraq.

The purpose of this hearing is not to look backward but to see how to best respond to the needs of our communities. In this regard, it must be understood that the causes brought forth ISIS still remain--discrimination, ignorance, and hatred against the Yezidis and other religious minorities. There were already serious multi-faceted problems facing the Yezidis before the ISIS attacks.

The fall of the ISIS caliphate does not eliminate those root causes and the dangers that continue to face the Yezidis.

In response to these pressing and, in fact, existential threats to the Yezidi community in Iraq, the Yezidis must be empowered, informed and supported to attain sustainability and stand on our own feet. The Yezidis must not become dependent on aid or on any government. We therefore urge the United States and all donors to ensure that the tools, the skills and education for

Yezidis are included as fundamental aspects of assistance.

We have five areas of concerns. These are of great importance for sustainability and, in fact, the survival of the Yezidi community in Iraq. We believe that these priorities merit special attention, particularly in terms of resources and attention from policymakers.

One of them is opportunity for education and employment. On an individual level, on the ground, we know that many families struggle to find work, ensure education for their children, and shape a dignified future.

The Yezidis have always been the last in Iraq to receive any opportunities. At the most basic level, more must be done to ensure that Yezidis have education, skills, and chances to govern their own lives on a daily basis. Our adults must get better chances for jobs, and our children absolutely must have fair chances for basic and university education.

I do not believe that any progress is

possible for Yezidis in Iraq without this. Yezidis will not survive in Iraq through subsistence farming and outdated ways of living; we must have a chance to join the modern economy.

One of the things that was discussed today is the second point, and that's security. One of the fundamental goals of U.S. assistance is to help minorities, like the Yezidis, to return to their areas of origin. When we speak to Yezidis in the internally displaced camps, there is always one primary reason for not returning, and that is security.

This is not to say that Shingal is in conflict all the time, but for families to return, there must be reliable, non-discriminatory, and sustained security for our people every single day. Most families simply do not believe this. In that sense, assistance must be designed very carefully. Return must be voluntary and safe, and we must not lure minorities back into dangerous situations with promises that could put their safety at risk.

Most Yezidis tell us that security is the

primary necessity, more than roads, infrastructure, water and electricity.

The third point is political representation. The Yezidis are woefully underrepresented in every single way--in Baghdad, in Erbil, and at governorate, district and sub-district levels. There is only one Yezidi member of parliament in Baghdad. There are established quotas for numbers of seats in the Kurdistan Region Parliament for Christians (5), Turkmen (5), and Armenians (1). But there is no quota for Yezidis.

Without a voice, the Yezidis are easily excluded from decision-making. This is damaging at the local administrative level as at the regional and national levels, and it is totally unacceptable. Fair, proportional representation is essential, especially for religious minorities.

Number four is justice and accountability. It is not possible for Yezidis to return home without a successful effort to bring perpetrators to justice. These criminal atrocities, the worst criminal acts, must be punished. Of course, we are

pleased with the progress that is made by UNITAD and others and the efforts to reach to the affected communities.

But the entire world must work hard to build case files and bring indictments for these crimes, especially those committed by their own citizens. It is outrageous that so many ISIS members have returned to Europe or sit in Al-Hol camp, or in other prisons, and no relevant charges brought forward for the horrific human rights violations they committed or facilitated.

Justice. Impunity is what makes people not feel safe in Iraq. Because on a daily basis, the Yezidis are suffering discrimination, unfair treatment, and when the governments don't say anything about it, don't do anything about it, our people will suffer this, and when we say "root causes," I come to the next point, and that's diverse religious education.

As I mentioned, the root causes of the ISIS genocide against the Yezidis have not been eliminated. If prejudice and religious intolerance

remain, the Yezidis and other minorities will forever be in danger.

Iraq needs educational systems to include respect, accuracy, and fairness in how children are taught about other religious minorities. Many Iraqis grow up learning vicious stereotypes against Yezidis. Iraq should make a nationwide effort to change this. Children should learn the different religions in Iraq with respect and goodwill. This will be important if we wish to bury, once and for all, the poisonous ideology that ISIS and hatemongers use to build up their support.

I would like to again thank the U.S. Commission for testifying here today, and I hope that support will come for the endangered Yezidi communities so that they can stay in Iraq.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Ms. Ibrahim.

Any questions from commissioners?

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: Yes, thank you.

Thank you so much, Pari, and also Reine, both of you, for being such articulate voices for those that are still trying to recover from

genocide. You both have done, are doing just amazing work.

I was curious really for both of you. For those that are still in camps in KRG, are they able to freely move between those camps and their previous homes to be able to assess the conditions?

MS. IBRAHIM: So there was at one point a roadblock. The Sahaylah Road [ph] was blocked for Yezidis and other minorities. This was very concerning for the Yezidis. Eventually it opened, but this idea that it's open and they can just go back and forth is--it is a bit different.

The reality is so that the Yezidis can go back, but it's always made more hard than easy. I mean you have to go through a lot of checkpoints, and every checkpoint is another discussion, and every checkpoint another question of what are you doing here and what are you coming to do, and, yes, even our staff comes and goes and they do assessments of whether we can go back and work, but still till today we did not make the decision of doing that because it's not easy for us and even

for the Yezidi community to just go back and forth.

Also when we talk about the Yezidis that have returned, very honest, some Yezidis have returned that were displaced, but they are basically displaced in the areas that are not called their home. They are in towns surrounded by the mountain, and they are living there as internally displaced people.

MS. HANNA: I will echo Pari's statements. So generally speaking, they do have freedom of movement for the most part, but, as she mentioned, they must pass through checkpoints. Oftentimes, checkpoints that are controlled particularly by the Iranian militias and even by Peshmerga or Asayish forces. They do experience harassment or restriction on movement.

But generally speaking they're all right, but we have documented numerous incidents in which harassment has occurred.

CHAIR PERKINS: Just a question regarding the Assyrian, the Chaldean, and the Yezidi communities, I'll ask both of you.

Is the confidence in the Iraqi government growing or are you losing? I know this is an opinion because I'm asking you to speak for communities. Or is that confidence waning in the Iraqi government?

MS. IBRAHIM: I think for the Yezidi communities, when we look at the situation of like after more than five years being displaced in Iraq, we always say if there is a chance that we're on the agenda, we are probably the last point on the agenda to be discussed, and how our future would look like.

And if I look back at Iraq, the way it used to be and how it is now, my grandparents had Jewish people who were their friends, and my mother speaks Aramaic because she had Christian friends. Everyone has left. All her friends have left. She left, and now what we see from our community because there is no trust in the Kurdish government, in the Iraqi government, to do anything for the Yezidi community to remain in Iraq safe and secure and have a good future and hopes, I think

the Yezidis are all looking forward to go and resettle elsewhere.

And that's a huge problem. Why am I saying that? We do not want Lalish, our holy site, to be lost and our lands to be given to others because we are not there anymore. But this is the situation. No one has trust in any of the governments that are there.

MS. HANNA: Absolutely. And it's very similar for the Assyrian Christian community. I would say particularly in the aftermath of ISIS and even more so now, there's a complete lack of confidence in the authorities at both the federal and regional level, and even at the local level, in the sub-district councils, there is not a feeling of, you know, adequate representation or legitimate representation, and they don't feel that they are a priority for any side.

And, unfortunately, that's been demonstrated by the continued exodus of Assyrians from all parts of Iraq.

MS. IBRAHIM: Can I add?

MS. HANNA: Uh-huh.

MS. IBRAHIM: I would like to add that like when we talk about the government and different levels, I mean on a daily basis to feel safe and secure, you should feel that you're able to go outside and say "I am an Yezidi" without anyone attacking you. What anyone says in their homes, et cetera, not my problem.

But why can my people--the Yezidis--and the Christians not say that? Why are they afraid to show who they are? Because they are constantly targeted.

If I was a Yezidi in Iraq and I had a complaint, to whom do I go? Do I go to the Peshmergas who are listening to their government? And if I complain about something that happened to me--unfair treatment--is that really going to government officials about how I was treated--the unfair treatment of a Yezidi person? And that is the key problem.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you. Thank you very much.

We want to shift our second panel focus here now to our non-governmental organizations and partners that are working on the ground there to assist, and I'll turn first to Commissioner Ashoff, who is with Samaritan's Purse.

Samaritan's Purse has been a great partner of the United States. We appreciate the work that you're doing there in the Middle East and we look forward to your testimony.

MR. ASHOFF: Thank you, Commissioner Perkins, fellow commissioners, panelists. We're glad to be here to speak on this issue.

Thank you, Pari, for what you shared. We care about the situation of the Yezidis and the other minorities of northern Iraq.

In summer 2014, the Islamic State aggressively and brutally took over large portions of Iraq, as mentioned. In August of that year, they invaded Sinjar, kidnapping and killing thousands of Yezidi men, women, boys and girls.

Those who could fled to Sinjar Mountain for protection. They were surrounded by ISIS,

trapped without food or water, facing death. Our teams on the ground saw the need and worked with the Iraqi government to help airlift supplies-- winter clothes, blankets, shoes--to these families by helicopter.

Some Yezidis escaped; many did not. Some by foot by night, by airlift. Families were separated, irreversibly traumatized by what they faced and would face at the hands of ISIS. Understanding some of these effects of the atrocities they suffered, we set up assistance at Duhok for families unable to return home, including training in carpentry for heads of households, art therapy for children, professional trauma counseling to women who had been trafficked, and a medical clinic.

When conflict escalated again in Mosul in 2016, Samaritan's Purse established an emergency field hospital, just miles from the front lines. We wanted to provide lifesaving care to thousands of civilians and combatants who were affected by the conflict.

With most of the Nineveh Plains liberated in 2017, Samaritan's Purse shifted its focus to rebuilding and revitalizing the areas from which internally-displaced people had fled. Since 2015, we've served over three-quarters of a million people--returnees, IDPs of the Nineveh Governorate and Sinjar--with food, health, nutrition, shelter, psycho-social support, livelihoods, water, sanitation and hygiene. The ethnic and religious minorities in Nineveh were included in this assistance.

We began to learn a lot more about them at that point. Generally, we worked with the group in the greatest need so at that point it was anyone affected, but when we looked at our post-conflict strategy, we realized it was actually the Yazidis, the Christians and the other minorities that seemed most at risk.

Why they were at greater risk? They were marginalized and persecuted before the Islamic State came. They're victims of genocide at the hands of the Islamic State, and those who survived

were forced out of their homelands. We wanted to understand the extent of the damage and what barriers face their return.

To accomplish that, Samaritan's Purse conducted two large-scale assessments of the minority communities in Nineveh and Sinjar in 2017 and 2019. In 2017, we just wanted to understand the damage. We wanted to understand who returned, and we wanted to understand the barriers.

In 2019, we actually wanted to understand what was going on in the hearts and heads of the people who had returned or who had not. What did they think of their future? Was there hope? Would they return? Did they want to? What were the fears that they had at that time?

We learned a lot, and I'm glad we asked and interacted with thousands of the minority community members.

What we heard again and again was that they wanted to return and they wanted to stay. They wanted to rebuild their lives. They felt a strong sense of identity and belonging to this

land, their historic homelands in Nineveh and in Sinjar.

The greatest barriers to return, Pari has mentioned a number of them, but we found similarities between Nineveh and Sinjar. Certainly security was at the top of that list. Secondly was many had destroyed or damaged homes. Third, they needed economic opportunity. And again these were similar in both locations. The exact order was a little bit different.

Well informed by the voices and concerns of these communities, we focused post-conflict assistance to address the core barriers. To date, we've partnered with Christian, minority Muslim and Yezidi homeowners to rebuild over 1,000 homes, large in Nineveh, but now extending into Sinjar.

We plan to work with these communities to repair many more homes, primarily in Sinjar next year. We'll shift west to those communities in force.

One widowed Christian homeowner and her family fled the Nineveh Plains with just the

clothes on their back. Three years later when her sons braved booby traps to discover the status of their home, they found it destroyed. We worked with that family to rebuild their home, and their son said our situation has been transformed from sadness to joy.

We think there are many more opportunities like this that need to be seized for the return of hope to the ethnic and religious minorities in Nineveh.

Livelihood opportunities are a second critical barrier to the sustainability of these communities, Commissioner Perkins, as you mentioned, not just surviving but thriving. We provide herds of sheep, beehives, agricultural cash grants to hundreds of returning households in Sinjar to reestablish livelihoods.

By the end of 2019, we will have helped over 1,000 households in this way. In addition, we rehabilitated an irrigation system on the Al Zab River that services more than 15 communities and benefits an estimated 16,000 people--Turkmen,

Kaka'i, and the Muslim minority included.

Great needs remain, particularly in areas like Sinjar District, which have seen relatively low rates of return. Desperate to come back, we found the Yazidis traveling up to three hours, at great personal risk and expense, to find out if they can be helped.

Financial need prevents them from moving back, but with home or hope of a job and certainly security, we believe many would return. Similarly, in eastern Nineveh, some smaller minority villages remain completely destroyed.

In early 2018, the number of returnees in Iraq roughly equaled the number of IDPs. Today returning numbers are triple that of IDPs. This encouraging shift underscores the reality that Iraq is recovering. Thanks to the concerted effort of the international community and the U.S., in particular, aid is reaching these communities.

However, the work is not done. That's been stated by everyone. To ensure their long-term survival in Iraq, Christian, Yezidi and other

religious minorities need a commitment, a strong commitment, that the U.S. and international partners will stay engaged in the coming years. There cannot be Iraq fatigue.

We need to promote restoration efforts and religious freedom. This commitment would reassure them that they have a future in the nation of their birth. Rebuilding will take time. There's a safety in numbers as well as a sense of shared identity and belonging, but timing is critical. We must reach those still displaced as they make decisions about whether they will have a viable future in Iraq, or if they will seek asylum elsewhere.

The minority communities must have a stronger incentive to return than to leave. And unflinching, resolute and vocal commitment from the U.S. government and the international community to stand with these communities will help them to continue to fight to remain in Iraq.

Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Mr. Ashoff.

Appreciate those comments.

We will go now to Mr. Portman. Mr. Portman, thank you for being here today and thank you for the work that you have done for a long time on behalf of human rights, and we're grateful for you being here today and look forward to your testimony.

MR. PORTMAN: Thank you to the commissioners, to the Commission's chair and co-chairs, for holding this hearing today and for your remarks on advocacy.

Heartland Alliance International has been active in Iraq since 2004. Our work is concentrated in the area of protection, legal protection for displaced persons and refugees, treatment and prevention of torture and enforced disappearance, gender rights, human trafficking, mental health, ethnic and religious minority rights.

Following the defeat of the Islamic State and with the support of USAID, Heartland Alliance International was working in partnership with

Yazda, the Alliance for Iraqi Minorities, Hammurabi, and the Iraqi Health Care Access Organization to provide comprehensive services for survivors of severe human rights violations from ethnic and religious minority communities in the Mosul Plains and Sinjar.

When I refer to ethnic and religious minorities, it's important to remember that these communities, Yezidis, Christians, Sabians and others, are minorities only with respect to their population size, not with respect to their historical and cultural importance, or their right to call themselves Iraqis and demand full rights as Iraqi citizens.

Indeed, these ancient communities are essential to Iraqi identity and history, not just for the minority communities themselves, but for all Iraqis.

Iraq, and particularly Nineveh Governorate, was historically one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse regions in the entire Middle East. And it's laudable that USAID

and the world community is trying to preserve that.

Although general security and economic conditions have improved since ISIL was defeated in Mosul in 2016, many challenges remain that impede return and risk full recovery of these communities.

As everybody has mentioned, security is primary among them. The Islamic State actually remains a threat in Sinjar, in part due to its proximity to Syria and communities in the south of Sinjar such as Baj, in which part of the population retains sustained support for the Islamic State.

There was a couple of raids, even in July, that we were required to, we had to suspend operations very briefly because of some raids by Islamic State fighters. So it's not just the PMF that are security issues. Actually the Islamic State is as well.

The Christian communities in the Nineveh Plains are at less immediate risk for a resurgence of the Islamic State for various geographic factors, but it's accurate to say that almost all Iraqis fear the return of the Islamic State and

fear the return of terrorism.

And this is particularly a concern farther south in Gara and parts of Kirkuk Governorate where we also operate.

Christian communities in the Nineveh Plains do continue to report harassment from both PMF forces and supporters of the Kurdish political parties, both of whom are in competition over land and economic resources and ultimately over political control of the area. This is part of the disputed territories and some of the same political tension that exists in Kirkuk with a different cast of characters exist as well in the Nineveh Plains. They're considered to be disputed territories.

And the major powers, the Kurdish forces and the central Iraqi government and the militias that are aligned with the central government, are in conflict over who's going to eventually rule this area.

We have received reports of PMF forces impeding freedom of mobility from some community members, including by restricting import and export

of commercial materials and agricultural produce from some of the towns in the Nineveh Plains.

I did want to say something about PMF Unit 30 though, Liwa al-Shabak, and maybe it's a little bit nuanced, but I do want to say that the Shabak themselves are a minority and were subjected to horrendous violence by the Islamic State, and they are subject to being manipulated by outside forces, including Iran, but when we talk about the Shabak community, it's important to remember the horrendous level of trauma that they went through, and our program, in fact, does serve some Shabak survivors of extreme human rights violations by the Islamic State.

The solution here is sustained diplomatic pressure and work with the Iraqi government to reach a sustainable solution that recognizes the Shabak's rights as minorities and the Christian's rights as minorities and doesn't allow one community, you know, to take advantage of outside forces and outside money to overwhelm another one.

PMF 50, the Kata'ib Babiliyun, the one by

Rayan Al-Khaldani, is another matter. They're much more, I think, dangerous in the long-term, and I do believe they are very closely aligned with Iran, and they have caused a lot of trouble in Tel Keppe. I think it's accurate to say that the lack of return into Tel Keppe, and some of the population, some of the hopefully not permanent demographic changes really can be attributed to some of these militias, particularly this one.

I think it was appropriate for the U.S. to put them on the terrorism list. We have not had run-ins with them, but we do risk, we are working in Tel Keppe on unrelated work, unrelated to this USAID project and have had some issues with them.

I wanted to talk about housing, land and property a little bit. Communities, not only do they need some control over the jurisdiction--you talked about the jurisdictional issues, about an autonomous area for the Christians in the Nineveh Plains, but beyond that, people just simply need title to their land. They need secure control over the land, and religious and ethnic minority

communities are under a severe sustained pressure over access to that land.

First is the myth of abandoned land. A lot of people are moving into land, particularly in the Christian communities, because members of the Christian communities remain in Erbil or displaced, and people are taking advantage of that even though the land title should remain with the Christian families themselves, to the point where the governor of Mosul proposed a housing development on Christian land south of Bakhdida and claiming that land was abandoned--it wasn't abandoned--it was Christian land. Now, this land, I should also say about the Nineveh Plains is that this probably the premier agricultural land in all of Iraq.

It gets consistently good harvests by rain-fed agriculture. It's famous for sesame and wheat, and the land is actually very valuable, particularly as other parts of Iraq experience climate change and dry up. This is especially the case in Sinjar. There's a lot of pressure moving northward and a lot of pressure on occupying some

of these premier agricultural lands that have traditionally been held by minorities, either the Christian or Yezidi community.

There have been some innovative approaches to securing land tenure. The TAPU office, the land registration office, is not well functioning yet, and it's subject to political pressure.

UN Habitat has created certificates of ownership for Yezidi families in Sinjar, which while they have not been tested in Iraqi courts, they do draw on community testimony and document family residence and do offer some sort of documentation, some sort of a piece of paper people can hold in their hands to leverage about ownership of the land.

We piloted the use of geographic information systems and documentation where individuals could provide affidavits, whatever documentation, physical documentation, they had over the use of their land, and that has been accepted in a couple of cases in Iraqi courts.

Iraqi Law 20 and 57 stipulate that

civilians may claim compensation for destroyed and damaged homes and property. It's a good law. It's widely popular among the Iraqi population, as you can imagine, and the compensation committees exist and they are active.

NGOs, including Heartland Alliance, routinely assist minority members document and submit claims. The problem is the payments. Actual payments are virtually nonexistent. In February 2018, 30 billion was pledged for the reconstruction of Iraq following the Islamic State.

Most of this has been used legitimately by World Bank and by others for rebuilding and reconstruction of critical infrastructure. But what always comes last is the actual compensation of individuals for housing that they've lost.

I want to point out Samaritan's Purse's work in actually rebuilding houses. This is expensive work. It's beyond our capacity as an organization. I'm glad somebody is doing it. Ultimately, it needs to be the Iraqi government that actually funds reconstruction and gets money

into the hands of people who will indeed rebuild their land.

I wanted to talk a little bit about perception and return. You know even with economic support, there is--decisions regarding return may not be based on solely on objective assessment of security or economic opportunity.

The horrific record of the Islamic State is only the most recent event in a long history of trauma and violence. For many individuals and families, recent events shake their confidence that they can ever be fully safe in Iraq.

Many Iraqi Christians fled violence during and after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and during the Armenian genocide, and during the intervening decades, additional Christians have obtained refugee status or simply migrated to the U.S. and Europe. There's a strong sense among many families that their future in Iraq will never be secure, and immigration, particularly in the Christian community, continues at a significant rate.

The Yezidi community has not experienced these waves of out migration, with the exception of a movement to Armenia following the 1914 genocide, which also affected the Yezidis. For the first time, there's a significant Yezidi diaspora, and this may be a pull factor for further migration.

This is especially the case for traumatized individuals who may not be able to recover economically within Iraq, including women who elected to keep their children conceived as a result of rape and who are unlikely to find acceptance in their original communities.

So I just want to say that the door needs to remain open to migration. People should be able to migrate back and forth, but at the same time, we need to do everything possible to encourage people to stay.

So how to reverse this tendency toward out-migration? One of the--well, first off, I hardly need to mention it, but continued engagement and support by USAID and by the U.S. government and continued assurance, security assistance to the

Iraqi government to assure that the Islamic State doesn't return is just essential. I think everybody here--all the panelists agree that continued U.S. engagement is essential.

But another issue is that the ethnic and religious minority communities need justice. They need real justice. There needs to be trials of ISIS perpetrators, and the problem right now is that the perpetrators of these horrific, horrific crimes, are being tried for crimes against the state.

They're being tried for membership in the Islamic State. They're not being tried for rape. They're not being tried for murder. They're not being tried for mass killings. And so there's really a need to shift the trials of the ISIL perpetrators away from simple membership in ISIL to focus on those that committed the atrocities and to try them for those atrocities with the voices of the minority communities.

I want to point out the good work of the Free Yazidi Foundation in that regard. I'm not at

liberty to talk at length about it, but we're working on a few cases together, and for sure they get this and they understand this and have been essential in this effort.

So the transitional justice process requires a public record, requires a real public record, and for everyday average Muslawis and majority communities to understand the depth of the crimes that have been created. So the Islamic State is tried for these crimes, and people can't say this is just the Shia beating up on the Sunnis or this is just the Sunni community now having lost the war now has to suffer the consequences.

That's a dangerous thought, and there are many Muslawis that could embrace that thought or could come to terms with what has actually happened. In that regard, there needs to be a lot more attention paid to the judicial system in Iraq.

We've been training judges for a long time on the use of torture, and judges have acquitted 20 cases in which the only cases, the only evidence was confessions extracted through torture.

The High Court of Cassation has reversed them and returned them to the courts again. But I guess my point is you don't just need to torture a confession out of somebody when there's so much evidence in Iraq. Why not go after that real evidence? Why just torture somebody until they agree that they're Islamic State and then shotgun them through an inadequate legal system?

So I would urge the commission to--and the U.S. government--to exert more influence or more persuasion on the Iraqi government to really put in place a real system of accountability for the Islamic State that calls, that really brings their crimes to light and exposes it for all Iraqis, not just for the minority communities.

And I think doing that will make minorities feel like perhaps things have begun to change.

I just wanted to close by saying--to recognize the resilience of the minority communities in Iraq. In 1914, the Armenian genocide, many, many people fled Diyarbakir in

Turkey, what's now Turkey, and fled to Sinjar where they sought assistance from the Yezidi community who protected them on Sinjar Mountain.

This sort of echoes now in Sinjar Mountain being a site of protection during the Islamic State as well. That bond has lasted over the years between the Yezidi and Christian community. I found myself in a hospital in Geneva in 1984, and the person that came to visit me was a woman who had walked out of Diyarbakir in 1914. And they're all gone now.

But hearing those stories I never thought that I would eventually come across this again. But I think it's worth reflecting that the Armenian community continues, the Assyrian community continues, and the Yezidi community continues, and that there have been these waves of persecution, and that we need to recognize the inherent resilience of these communities even if there's population changes and even if some of the lands they traditionally occupied they may not be able to return to.

Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Mr. Portman.
Very, very helpful.

We are almost at the conclusion of our hearing. Commissioner Maenza had to--I mean Commissioner Manchin had to catch a flight, and since her husband arranged the room at four o'clock, the lights and microphone go off.

But with that in mind, I'm going to ask Mr. Bauer--Commissioner Bauer has a question he would like to ask, and then Commissioner Maenza will make a final statement, and I will close this out.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Reine, you obviously know the history of Christians in Iraq more than I do. I believe it's true that in the Bible, the nation that's mentioned most often is Israel. The second nation that's mentioned most often by other names obviously is Iraq. The patriarchs all trace their roots back there. I think the whole Book of Esther takes place there.

Daniel was in the lion's den there, which

it sounds like where Christians and other minorities are today. If you could talk to all of the Christians in America at one point, what would you say to them about what they ought to be doing and how much they ought to care about what's happening to their fellow believers in Iraq?

MS. HANNA: Sure. So I think, as I mentioned in my testimony, the attention to religious freedom is really unprecedented, and I think that with the increasing awareness, obviously we've seen unprecedented amounts of aid and attention to the issues impacting these ancient Christian communities.

So what I would say is please stay informed and, you know, a lot of the issues that are impacting these communities are not necessarily, you know, headlines. They don't make the news that often. So please find ways that you can stay informed about the real issues that they're facing and find any way that you can potentially support them and help preserve Christianity in its birthplace.

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: We have just a few minutes. I wanted to say to both you, Aaron, Samaritan's Purse, as well as Scott, you are with Heartland, I was able to meet both of your folks on the ground in Baghdad and was just blown away by the work you both have done with the rebuilding of homes and the transitional justice, the land right issues, so many of these legal issues that your team has been able to dive into is just, has really bolstered the religious minority community and helped them to be able to advocate. So thank you for that.

You know, we keep coming down to security, so many good things are happening, but it's hard for people to come back and, in particular, with your experience, with your folks on the ground, I'd love to hear what the ideal security framework would look like, and how could we move towards that?

Obviously, we know the militias are a problem, but I'm curious to hear what your recommendations would be, things the U.S.

government can do now? Either one of you, Aaron or Scott?

MR. PORTMAN: That would be a long conversation.

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: Yes.

MR. PORTMAN: And I don't want to take up too much of your--

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: And you can also present some more information in writing that could help inform our recommendations.

MR. PORTMAN: That's true. I absolutely would like to do that. Did you want to add anything?

MR. ASHOFF: I talked to our teams this morning and asked them a similar question. And I think we'd like to think more on it.

The one thing they did mention is in spite of the complex security environment that's constantly changing, that one thing that's important is to fight for access to these communities, that we found one thing in the midst of it is to keep teams out there of humanitarian

actors who can be out there and speak towards what they see, and it does offer some semblance in the midst of a security picture that's not complete or static.

So we'll think more on that and share our reflections on it with you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Well, thank you very much. I want to thank all of our witnesses today. I do want to thank you, Mr. Portman, Mr. Ashoff, for the work that Samaritan's Purse and Heartland does. It's just a representation of many of the NGOs that are out there, but if I can take just a moment to say I also think it reflects what is good about America, and that we help those in need.

So thank you for the work that you do there in Iraq and thank you for taking time to be here today. Your testimony was very enlightening. We do look forward to a follow-up on that.

In addition, we have received other written testimony that is in line with the testimony we heard here today, and I want to thank you, Ms. Hanna and Ms. Ibrahim, for being here

today, for bringing your perspectives, and this is a part of the role of our Commission, is to give voice to these issues so they're not forgotten because we believe, and I believe it is the policy of this administration, in understanding that diversity brings stability to Iraq, and Iraq brings stability to the Middle East.

And that's why it is important, and we want to get this right. I think what we've heard here today and what we've heard and read in the written testimony that has been submitted by others is that security is at the top of the concerns, that economic opportunity follows right behind that, but I think we have to understand that economic opportunity is not going to come without security.

I think the international community sees that in terms of their willingness to invest in Iraq to make it a sustainable country where it is not looking for foreign aid but rather it is able to stand on its own. It is a country full of resources. It is a country that's filled with rich

history, and that's where I think America wants to see it go. But religious freedom is intertwined with this.

What we heard today and what we have seen is that the U.S. government is doing a lot, and USAID is on the ground helping meet the humanitarian needs, helping with the infrastructure, partnering with the NGOs that are meeting the needs.

And we've also seen and heard that the minority communities are committed to remaining in their homeland if they can. Everyone is doing their part. The only void we see is on behalf of the Iraqi government, and I believe that we need, our recommendation, and we've formalized as we review all of the data, is that the Iraqi government needs to use its influence to be a partner, a full partner, in this, and we look forward to being able to finalize recommendations to the administration on how we can ensure that Iraq does, in fact, have religious freedom, political representation, economic development and

security.

Again, I want to thank you for being here today. I want to thank those who have an interest and concern in international religious freedom, and for being here today, and this concludes our hearing.

[Whereupon, at 4:04 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]